

Using Vegetation to Assess Wetland Condition:

a multimetric approach for temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands and herbaceous-dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands in the northwestern glaciated plains ecoregion, Montana

Prepared for:

Montana Department of Environmental Quality
and
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

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SUMMARY

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality is implementing a comprehensive wetland monitoring and assessment program to evaluate the condition of the state's wetlands. As part of this effort, the Montana Natural Heritage Program is developing site-level numerical vegetation biocriteria for wetlands. Assessing wetland condition by measuring the response of the biological community has been successfully demonstrated in many wetland systems using a variety of taxa. This study attempted to evaluate wetlands by measuring vegetation response to anthropogenic stressors for temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional and herbaceous-dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands in the northwestern glaciated plains ecoregion in north-central Montana. Sample wetlands were ranked along a human disturbance gradient based on site- and local landscape-level factors. Vegetation attributes that changed predictably along this gradient were identified and combined into a multimetric index for each wetland type. These indices were significantly related to wetland condition, as measured by the human disturbance gradient, for both depressional and riverine wetlands. When wetlands were divided into three disturbance categories (reference con-

dition, moderately disturbed, and severely disturbed), vegetation metrics were able to correctly classify 73% of depressional and 86% of riverine wetlands sampled. The multimetric index for depressional wetlands responded primarily to on-site agricultural disturbance and was comprised of four metrics: the floristic quality index and relative cover of native perennials, species with a coefficient of conservatism ≥ 4 , and exotic species. The riverine multimetric index responded primarily to on-site grazing intensity and included the richness of native perennials, Simpson diversity index, proportionate richness of tolerant species, relative cover of intolerant species, and floristic quality index.

Another aspect of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of classifying watersheds (5th-level U.S. Geological Survey hydrological units) into disturbance categories based on land use patterns. Watershed-scale disturbance categories showed no correlation with either wetland condition as measured by site-level and smaller-scale disturbance measures or vegetation metrics. Smaller-scale disturbance factors appear to be more important in determining condition of sampled wetlands in this study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	iii
Introduction.....	1
Methods.....	2
Study Area	2
Geology and Climate	2
Depressional Wetlands.....	2
Riverine Wetlands.....	3
Upland Vegetation	4
Study Design.....	4
Watershed Ranking.....	5
Targeted Sampling.....	6
Data Collection	6
Data Analysis.....	8
Human Disturbance Parameters.....	8
Multimetric Methods	10
Multivariate Methods.....	15
Results.....	16
Watershed Disturbance Categories	16
Depressional Wetlands.....	16
Metrics and the Multimetric Index	16
Vegetation Community Response.....	19
Riverine Wetlands.....	20
Metrics and the Multimetric Index	22
Vegetation Community Response.....	24
Discussion.....	24
Acknowledgments.....	30
Literature Cited	30
Appendix A. Species Lists for Depressional and Riverine Wetlands.....	A-1
Appendix B. Photographs of Sites Representative of Reference Condition, Moderately Disturbed, and Severely Disturbed Wetlands	B-1

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Human disturbance factors used to rank 5 th -level watersheds in the Middle Milk sub-basin	7
Table 2. Functional weights assigned to land cover types.....	7
Table 3. Disturbance factors used to develop human disturbance indices for depressional and riverine wetlands.....	12
Table 4. Vegetation attributes initially considered as potential metrics for depressional and riverine wetlands and their predicted response to increasing human disturbance	13
Table 5. Ranges of attribute values for metric scoring categories for temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands	21
Table 6. Species indicative of severely disturbed and reference condition temporarily or seasonally flooded depressional wetlands	24
Table 7. Ranges of attribute values for metric scoring categories for herbaceous-dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands.....	26

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Study area and locations of sample wetlands	3
Figure 2. Extent of national wetland inventory coverage in the study area.....	6
Figure 3. Selected 5 th -level watersheds and their relative disturbance categories.....	8
Figure 4. Schematic illustrating how temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands were ranked along a human disturbance gradient.....	10
Figure 5. Schematic illustrating how herbaceous-dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands were ranked along a human disturbance gradient.....	11
Figure 6. Bar graphs of disturbance measures by watershed disturbance categories for temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands.....	17
Figure 7. Bar graphs of disturbance measures by watershed disturbance categories for herbaceous-dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands.....	17
Figure 8. Bar graphs of vegetation metrics by watershed disturbance categories for temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands.....	18
Figure 9. Bar graphs of vegetation metrics by watershed disturbance categories for herbaceous- dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands.....	19
Figure 10. Scatter plots of attribute values against site disturbance index for temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands	20
Figure 11. Relationship between multimetric index and site disturbance index for temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands (n = 30).....	21
Figure 12. The predicted membership of temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands to disturbance categories compared with actual group membership	22
Figure 13. Graphical representation of the NMS ordination of sampled temporarily and seasonally flooded depressional wetlands	23
Figure 14. Scatter plots of attribute values against site disturbance index for herbaceous- dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands.....	25
Figure 15. Relationship between multimetric index and site disturbance index for herbaceous- dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands (n = 22).....	26
Figure 16. The predicted membership of herbaceous-dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands to disturbance categories compared with actual group membership.....	27
Figure 17. Graphical representation of the NMS ordination of sampled herbaceous-dominated intermittent and ephemeral riverine wetlands.....	28